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ABSTRACT

Guided writing after model paragraphs is an effective technique to initiate beginning and intermediate students of English as a second language into English composition. The technique of oral composition requires that the students prepare statements according to a model for oral delivery. In class composition, one student goes to the board and acts as the class scribe: the class will correct his errors as he answers prescribed questions on the board. This technique may be varied by using a direct dictation rather than question answering. Yet another technique involves breaking the class up into small groups, each of which will produce a composition. Relaxation and guided imagery may evoke material for a writing assignment. All these techniques enhance writing skills by making the experience of writing more pleasurable for the student. (JB)

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A New Look at Guided Writing or Overcoming the "I Hate to Write" Syndrome

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This morning, I would like to talk about ways of getting beginning and intermediate students of ESL to write, with a minimum of hesitancy and errors, and a maximum of participation and confidence.

There are essentially two basic parts to writing-

1. Learning (or knowing how) to write and being able to do it and
2. Doing it (or the actualization)

The reaction of many people when asked to write, is one of anxiety caused by the feeling of "I have nothing to say" or the feeling of "I just can't get started". For ESL students with limited language skills, the reaction is even more severe. One way to get ESL students started writing at an early stage is through the use of Guided Writing.

By Guided Writing I mean model paragraphs that the student is asked to follow when writing his own compositions.

The model paragraphs I use are based on topics that the student can identify with and that are within his personal experience range- For example, My First Day in the U.S. or Education in My Country. He can always transpose his own experience or information. This means he always has "what to say".

The model paragraphs use structures that the beginning ESL student can handle and vocabulary that again is within his experiential domain- This teaches his "how to say it".

At the end of every lesson there is an outline that follows the model paragraph and shows him "how to organize" his composition.

The composition lesson also includes a number of exercises on the grammatical focus and on the vocabulary and idioms.

Presumably, upon completion of the lesson the student should be ready to write-Unfortunately this is not always true. He does have all the elements necessary for writing-He has "what to say" because he is familiar with the topic. He knows "how to say it" because the model composition gave him the structure and the idiom, and he knows "how to organize it" because he has the outline to follow. But all of the foregoing were intellectualizations and some students need the actual experience to help them understand fully, others just lack self-confidence, and still others need something to help them get started.

It is because of these self-imposed problems that I would like to suggest the use of a second composition, using various techniques, as an intermediary step before asking the student to write a final composition.

What follows is a taste of possibilities for eliciting second compositions after the students have already finished a model lesson.

The examples I am going to give are based on model compositions for beginning and intermediate students, but the techniques can be used at any level.

Method #1 - Oral Composition

The first technique is Oral Composition. Here the student is asked to present an oral composition based on the model. With beginning students, the first composition is usually "The Weather in New York City",(See Model A) a very simple paragraph using the verb "to be". After the lesson, the student prepares an oral composition, at home, based on the weather in his own city. The next day he presents his talk to the class. While speaking, he is allowed to look at the model itself or at an outline. Then, using the same format and structures, he gives his oral presentation. He may make changes in the composition as long as he follows the same organization and the same grammatical and syntactical patterns.

If a student is having trouble expressing himself, the teacher may help by asking questions during the talk. The teacher can also make any necessary corrections. At the end of each talk, the other students are encouraged to ask questions about the weather in the speaker's country and elicit any other information regarding this topic. All new vocabulary words about weather are listed on the board so that there is an enrichment of vocabulary relating to the subject that may not have appeared in the original model. For instance, the model talks about the weather in New York City with words pertaining to New York City climate. Additional words that might come up in talking about other geographical areas are the dry season, the wet season, storms, hurricanes, typhoons,etc.

Topics that lend themselves particularly well to oral compositions are talks about one's country- For example, Education in My Country, the Geography of My Country, the Government of My Country,etc.

The question may arise- Isn't it more difficult and more anxiety provoking to give an oral composition than to write a composition. Not necessarily- If the student knows what is expected of him, the subjects are

carefully chosen, and a trust level has been established. For one thing, the student has chorally read the model with the teacher in class, so he is familiar with the pronunciation, intonation patterns and phrasing. Then, he has the model composition in front of him, so there is no memorization necessary, and he knows exactly how to express and structure the talk. If he needs help, the teacher is there for assistance, but usually the need is minimal. I always use an oral composition technique for the first lesson. At first only the braver and better students get up (and it is volungary) but this provides examples to the student who did not understand what "follow the model" meant. Once they hear it done correctly, I find there is almost no misunderstanding of what is meant by "follow the model" and the outline.

Another subject that students are willing to talk about readily is the game type of composition. (See Model B-"What Am I?") The composition "What Am I?" focuses on the present simple tense, and describes the daily activities or duties of a particular type of worker without revealing what the particular job is.—It ends with the tease question "What Am I?" which the audience or reader has to guess. As an oral composition this becomes a structured game between the speaker and the class and there is a good deal of communication exchanged before the correct answer is given.

It is not difficult to get students to talk when the topic is carefully chosen. Almost all students want to talk about their country and to share information about it. They also enjoy giving talks that present problem solving questions where the audience has to guess at an answer. The desire to stump someone is universal especially when the speaker is holding all the pieces of the game in his hand, and is playing the game in a new language. This is one of the few times when a beginning language student has a sense of power.

A teacher of beginning students of English who chooses his topics from these two areas should have no trouble getting his students to get up and talk.

Technique #2- Class Composition

The second technique is a class composiiion. In this method, one student goes to the board and acts as the class scribe. Using the model composition "A Classroom"(see Model C) the teacher asks carefully organized questions based on the students' actual classroom. For example- How large is your classroom?, What color are the walls and ceiling?,What is one one wall?, etc. The class must agree on the answer sentences before the scribe writes them. They can correct his spelling or punctuation while he is writing. If the scribe wishes, he can ask the other students for help in spelling. After the entire composition is on the board, the class decides whether any of the sentences can be improved or combined. When all have agreed on the changes, the composition is read through chorally and the entire class copies it. With total class participation, everyone has a second model to work from.

This particular composition seems simple on the surface because the structure uses only the verb "to be" with the focus on expressions of place. However, it is not simple. The writing organization of a description of a room is difficult for many of our students. They tend to make random selections of the objects they are describing rather than moving on progressively from one area to the next, according to the English rhetorical style. Writing a second composition helps to reinforce this idea of organization. When they have finished this second composition, the students write a description of their own room at home following the two models and the outline.

Technique #3 - Class Dictations

In the third technique, one student goes to the blackboard. (It is a good idea to try to choose someone who has a good handwriting and can spell.)

(See Model D- "A Letter to a Friend")

The focus here is on the use of the present continuous tense for ongoing activities. Based on the model, the teacher dictates a second composition. This can be about any place that the students are familiar with. For instance, the dictation can be about the student cafeteria or lounge, describing the people there and what they are doing. Again when the dictation is finished, the students look at the board and suggest corrections. When all agree that the board is correct, the students self-correct their own papers. With the second model in view and having been worked on personally by each student, the organization of the composition is again pointed out and so is the necessity for choosing a place to write about where many people are performing a variety of activities. The teacher then asks the students to write a letter to a friend describing a place, the kinds of people there, and what they are doing. The student can, if he wishes, imagine he is sitting in a cafe in his own country and then write a letter to a friend in the United States de scribing the scene in his country.

Technique #4 Group Work

It's a good idea for many kinds of second compositions, to let the students work in small groups of 3 or 4. This small grouping lends itself to a good exchange of information and discussion and a lot of peer help. I have found it more effective to choose the members of the group rather than let the students do it themselves. This avoids cliques and ensures a different grouping each time.

It also avoids the problem of the unpopular or poor student not being chosen. It is important to form groups carefully. Since you want the exchange to be in English, try to avoid putting students with the same native language in the same group, and try to mix the slower and the faster

students in the same group. The better students can help the slower students who, nevertheless, will contribute equally. There are many different ways a group second composition can be written and I would like to give some examples.

One of the model compositions (not in the handout) is called "Abraham Lincoln". There are four paragraphs in the composition, with the headings- Early Childhood, Youth, Maturity, and End of Life- which follow the outline. After the students have studied this composition and completed the exercises, they hear a lecture on the life of John F. Kennedy- organized and following the same outline. They hear the lecture twice and take notes. They also have a copy of the outline to follow. When they have finished their individual notetaking, they are then told that they will write a composition from their notes, but in groups of 3 or 4. To further guide them, they are then given the beginning words or phrases for each of the four paragraphs. One student acts as the secretary and all the students must contribute using their combined notes. They must agree on the sentences, grammar, phraseology, facts, spelling, etc.

When the composition is finished, each one in the group must read and check the finished composition and sign his name to it.

After the second composition is corrected, each student individually writes about a famous person in his own country.

Another way of utilizing groups for composition work is to have the students work on a subject they all have a knowledge of. For example- in the model composition "How to Get Along in the United States" there are two paragraphs of advice of "do's" and "don'ts".

<u>Do's</u>

Ex. Get or borrow a dog! Walk him several times a day! Americans love pets and will stop to talk to anyone with a dog.

Learn the expressions, "Please","Thank you", and "You're Welcome" before you come and use them all the time! They usually work like magic.

Don'ts

Ex. Don't tell the truth when people ask "How are you?" They only expect the answer to be "Fine".

Don't tell heavy people they are fat. Tell them they are losing weight. Everyone here is diet-conscious and wants to be thin.

After completing the lesson, the students form small groups to discuss other "do's" and "don'ts" for newcomers. Each group collectively then writes a letter of advice to a friend. Their individual assignment would then be to write a letter to an American giving advice on "How to Get Along in the Student's Country"..

Before I talk about the next technique, I would like to ask you all to participate in a demonstration.

Close your eyes, sit back in your seat, and relax. Look at the images as they unfold.

Demonstration -

Imagine walking up to a fence. There is a ladder leaning against it. Climb the ladder and look over the fence. What do you see? What do you do? What do you feelon the other side of the fence?

Were you able to imagine this sequence? Tell us what you saw, what you did and how you felt on the other side of the fence?

Technique #5 Relaxation and Guided Imagery

This particular technique calls for the students to relax while the teacher guides them into image making.

The relaxation technique can be very simple-Ask the students to close their eyes, to sit comfortably in their seats, feet flat on floor and hands

on their laps (palms up or palms down) -When everyone is in position, ask them to relax and breathe deeply two or three times and to clear their minds-(If you wish, to help them clear their minds, you can tell them to see a blank TV screen on thwich they are going to put on their own TV show).

Guided Imagery lends itself particularly well to compositions of sensory perceptions. If the composition is based on the model "My Favorite Month", I would ask the students to relax and close their eyes. Then I would ask them to think of their favorite month and visualize themselves some particular place that month.

The instructions might be as follows:

Think of your favorite month of the year. Try to see yourself doing something in that month. What is the weather like? Look around you carefully. Look at all the different colors around you. Put you hand out and touch the month. How does it feel? How does everything around you smell?

Perform your favorite activity in that month. See and feel yourself doing it on the TV scfeen. Enjoy yourself and try to visualize with all your senses how you feel, the smells around you, and the sounds you hear. Experience your favorite month totally.

After all the images have been experiences, give the instructions "Now turn off the TV and open your eyes" (If you think someone is enjoying himself too much, you might give him another 30 seconds to turn off his TV set.)

The teacher then asks the students to verbalize their imagery to the class. My experience has been that when this process is done successfully, you don't have to prod the students. They usually want to volunteer to speak and relate their imagery.

It is very important in this type of exercise to choose topics that can

be visualized or sensorily experienced. The more senses involved, the better the exercise. The students usually speak very freely when they are cognitively disinhibited.

Other good topics for visualizations are "My First Day in the United States", "My Last Vacation", and "How I Would Like to Spend My Birthday".

It is not enough to ask the student to visualize the subject. When he is in a relaxed state, the suggestions should be given step by step, with enough time between each suggestion, so that the student can visualize and then perform the activity in mental kinesthetics. It is advisable to limit the number of suggestions for a beginning student. It isn't necessary to do an entire composition. It is important only to get the student started and elicit some sentences and data based on the subject he is going to write about.

Once the student has expressed himself verbally through this process, the actual writing becomes much easier and flows more smoothly because the student knows he can do it and that he has something to say, since he has already produced part of it. Through the use of this process, the internalized language comes out more freely. (Some of my students tell me they use this technique when they are alone writing their individual compositions.) This technique also helps eliminate avoidance rituals.

In order to do visualization exercises, the student must have confidence in the teacher and the teacher must create the ambience that makes relaxation and guided imagery possible. The success of this technique depends on a calm, reassuring voice and a relaxed, friendly manner on the part of the teacher. Most people are open to suggestion and will follow the instructions if they trust the leader and feel that it will help them in language learning. I have found most students amenable to trying new techniques and new approaches as a welcome change of pace and relief from the tedium of everyday class exercises.

Technique #6- Throwing the Ball

The final technique that I would like to share with you is a way of unblocking the problem creating area through a game which involves the throwing of a ball in a circle.

After the model composition on the present perfect, the class sits in a close circle. The teacher tells them they are going to tell everyone what they have already done or seen, or eaten since their arrival in New York. They also have to relate what they haven't done, seen, or eaten yet but hope to before they leave. These are the rules of the game:

Seated in this tight circle, the teacher throws the ball to one student. Whoever gets the ball must start speaking. When he is through, he throws the ball to any other student who then starts to speak. Noone knows who is going to get the ball. If any student wishes to receive the ball and speak, he can raise his hand and the last speaker throws the ball to him. Since everyone is concentrating on the ball and the game, all the students speak very easily and without reluctance. What has surprised me is how few mistakes the students make in the present perfect when they are involved in this "game" as compared to the number of mistakes they make in the present perfect tense when they are not playing.

The students enjoy this process and when they are through playing, everyone has already verbalized two paragraphs of the composition he will be writing.

This technique can be combined with the Guided Imagery technique very effectively. For example, if you use Guided Imagery for the topic "My First Day in the U.S." you can ask the students to form a seated circle and relate their experience while throwing the ball around. The concentration on who is going to receive the ball effectively eliminates the "I can't do it" or problem creating mechanism. By focusing on the ball, instead,

the innate language comes out naturally.

When using this technique it is important to choose your topics carefully and to set up the game discussion topic in a way that is within the language capabilities of your students and that will lead to the writing of a composition following the structures and outlines of the model composition.

The techniques I have just discussed are all geared to making writing easier and more pleasurable for the ESL student.

There are many advantages of second compositions:

1. By introducing this additional step, the student can discuss his ideas before the final writing. He discovers he has something to say.

2. The variety of techniques keeps the students interested and more open to speaking and writing under different conditions and in different situations.

3. There is a great deal of peer help and interest. A lot of communicative language practice takes place among the students themselves in questions and discussions as real language topics are discussed. This leads to the students becoming much closer to each other.

4. There are varied and ample opportunities to practice speaking, listening comprehension, and writing.

5. Errors are corrected at this time in a non-judgmental manner by teachers and peers. This helps eliminate many of the errors on the final composition.

6. The student learns to organize since all the techniques follow the outline and are not random discussions.

7. The student loses the fear of writing through constant reinforcement, participation, and interaction.

Finally,

8. He learns to write by doing it. He knows what is expected of him and that he can do it since he has already experienced the writing of the composition. This makes the final writing much easier.